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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of a French and Spanish second language program in grades four through seven of a rural school system has begun with a formative evaluation for the first three years and will conclude with a one-year summative evaluation. The research questions focus on four concerns: (1) school personnel and parent perceptions of the program during its first year; (2) what student achievement can be expected after one, two, and three years of instruction at 30 to 45 minutes twice weekly; (3) the methodology's consistency with current approaches; and (4) the best commercially-produced materials. Four data sources were considered in the first year of evaluation: interviews with people involved and not involved with the program, student scores on teacher-made tests, classroom observation, and preference surveys. All of these methods are to be used again at various points during the overall evaluation process. Findings about the program's first year include improved listening and use of memory among participants, improved academic achievement and attitudes among learning disabled students, interest among younger and older children, teacher and administrator interest and support, and parent support. Negative effects include loss of learning time, interruption of classes, variable student behavior upon returning from language instruction, and scheduling difficulties. (MSE)

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An Ethnographic Evaluation of a FLES Program

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INTRODUCTION

The terms "ethnographic" and "evaluation" may seem contradictory in their most commonly-used meanings, for we often think of evaluation as measuring some unit against a standard, and of ethnographic as setting its own standard from within the unit. Jarvis and Adams (1979) set forth useful guidelines for the evaluation of second language programs. Although the nature of the program being evaluated plays a major role in their suggestions, the evaluation process they describe represents a deficiency model, one intended to identify weaknesses and strengths measured against the ideal. The decisions to be made after the evaluation represent ways to bring the program into alignment with established criteria that are generally not derived from the population served. By contrast, an ethnographic evaluation has its roots in the persons who establish the program and those served by it.

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THE SCHOOL DIVISION[1]

A school division located in a small city in southwestern Virginia decided that an ethnographic evaluation would provide its leaders with precisely the information they sought. This school division, which historically has made decisions in a very democratic fashion, wanted the findings of the formative and the summative evaluations to reflect the voices of the people involved in the school division: students, parents, and school personnel.

This school division is located in mostly rural southwestern Virginia, in a small city that has a liberal arts university and several small industries. Total enrollment in the school system is approximately 1800 students.

THE RE-FLES PROGRAM

The FLES program is actually called RE-FLES, Revitalized Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools. It is jointly funded by the local school division and the Virginia Department of Education. The program provides for 30 to 45 minutes twice weekly in French or Spanish for ALL students in grades five and six in 1984-85. The program was to expand to grade four in 1985-86, but in actuality, it expanded into grades four and seven. In 1986-87, funding plans called for expansion of the program to grade three, but presently plans are being made to expand to grades three and eight, depending on the success of the expansion in 1985-86.

The classes are taught by two specialists, one in each language, who work cooperatively with 10 classroom teachers, music, physical education, and art specialists. The language specialists were selected primarily because of their experience and talent for teaching elementary-aged children and secondarily because of their training in Spanish and French.

Students in the fifth and sixth grade program receive no grade for their work, but they do receive feedback from the teachers about the quality of their work. Special efforts are made by the language specialists and by the regular classroom teachers to integrate content from both classes. Further, content from specialty classes, such as art, music, and physical education are also integrated with the language classes.

THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was to be formative for the first three years of the project, and summative upon completion of the three-year pilot program. It is currently in its second year. This paper describes the overall evaluation plan and the results of the study of the first year of implementation.

The areas of concern for the first year were determined through a four-hour interview with one administrator and two teachers who created the program. During this interview, the principle question was "What do you want to find out?" and discussion followed the framework set forth in the funding

proposal for the program. Several research questions emerged from this interview. They are:

1. What are the perceptions of school division personnel parents and students of the program during its first year? Specific attention was given to goals, activities, outcomes, and suggestions for next year.

2. What can be expected in terms of student achievement after one year of instruction, 30 to 45 minutes twice weekly? After two years and after three years of instruction?

3. Is the methodology used in the classrooms consistent with our best knowledge about successful strategies for teaching elementary-aged language learners?

4. What are the best commercially produced materials available for FLES programs?

Four data sources were considered: 1) ethnographic face-to-face interviews with people involved and those not involved with the program; 2) student scores on teacher-made tests; 3) direct observation of classroom instruction; and 4) preference surveys. The interviews, and test scores for the first year would provide baseline data for subsequent years of the study. Preference surveys would be developed for the second year of the program, based on findings from the first years' interviews. Comparative analysis of test scores over three years would be completed at the end of the program. Classroom observation and evaluation of commercially-produced materials is continuous throughout all three years of the project. All

instruments developed for the study were informed by data collected from people in the school division.

Results avialable at this point include findings from the ethnographic interviews, test scores from the end of the first year, and several classroom observations. First, I will describe the interview format, the interview process, and the results. The intent of this open-ended interview was to obtain the RANGE of perceptions that exist among persons involved with and not involved with the program, and to attempt to establish some relationship between their perceptions and the actual workings of the program. Persons interviewed represented every major group in the school division: students, parents, classroom teachers, language teachers, specialist teachers, principals, and administrators. Interviewees were selected to represent positive and negative opinions about the program. Fifteen open-ended, interviews of 17 questions each were conducted in Spring, 1985. Questions were designed to exhaust the conceptual space of informants about goals, activities, outcomes, and suggestions for changes in the program for the second and third years of the project. Some questions were posed singly, e.g., "What suggestions do you have for expanding the program to grade four next year?" Other questions were posed in pairs like the following example:

1. From what you know, what are all the goals of the FLES program? (=X)

1. b. What is being done to meet the goal of X_____?

Eleven of the interviewees were directly involved with the program and four were not. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 2.5 hours. All responses were written, not tape-recored by the researcher to allow respondants more time to think of things to include in their answers.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

The first finding is that there seems to be a great deal of euphoria about this program expressed by respondants throughout the school division, regardless of the degree of their involvement with the program. Very positive statements about the goals, activities, and outcomes were supported by respondants whose chief recommendation for change next year was to expand the program downward and upward through the grades. This means that the range of opinion sought in the interviews lies all at one end of the continuum. Some respondants were purposefully selected because it was likely that they might have a negative voice. Even they supported the program. The only aspects of the program that were treated in the slightest negative way were the logistics of scheduling and articulation with upper-level courses, but even here respondants expressed great faith that the "details will be ironed out."

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Findings about goals. Generally, respondants demonstrate agreement between their perceptions of the program's goals and those set forth in documents prepared within the school division to secure funding. Those who demonstrate the least familiarity with the goals are those who are not yet involved with the program, i.e., students and parents, teachers, principals in the fourth and lower grades and in the seventh and higher grades. The benefits of securing the good will of those whose lives will be altered by the program have already been made clear as the program is well received in grades 5 and 6 where lots of "groundwork" has been laid. The path of the program is much rockier in grade 7, where less consulting has been done with people who are directly affected by it. One respondant stated that "someone needs to look at the whole thing and get a grip on it."

The program is meeting or surpassing all expectations. Students are "acquiring an ear for the language," "conversational French is [happening] in the halls," "parents say the kids are bringing the language home" and teaching their siblings. There is a "better understanding of the geography, culture and people" of the countries where Spanish and French are spoken and students are "more tolerant of other minorities and nationalities."

Findings about activities. The program has made itself felt in extensive ways across the school division and the community demonstrated with the activities of the program. Even those who are not in the program know what happens in the classrooms. They

know about the "warm, nonthreatening environment" that teachers strive to create; they know about the songs, skits, filmstrips, games, and prizes that are a major part of the class activities. One student said, at first, "Oh, we don't do much [in French class]." Then she went on to enumerate seven different activities, all in one breath, including titles of filmstrips that they had seen, and all the place names were pronounced in French.

The public relations aspect of the program has been very effective. Among the steps taken to publicize the program were lots of newspaper releases; a Christmas program for parents; a program for the school board; handouts for students and parents at the beginning of the year explaining the philosophy of the program and everything that would be taught (samples are available here); teacher visits to third grade students and teachers; meetings with high school language teachers; parent conferences, etc.

Among those areas in which there was a range of opinion is the fit of the REFLES program with the rest of the curriculum. Respondants who said the program should fit, and does, gave examples of how it meshes with social studies, English language arts, math, and science in grades five and six as well as grades three and four. Some respondants were able to cite chapters in textbooks used at various grade levels, showing how they integrate with the study of French or Spanish. While some respondants who said it does and should fit had concerns that were of a curricular

nature, other respondants said that it doesn't and shouldn't fit with the rest of the curriculum. These people felt that the principle distinguishing feature of the program was the enthusiasm it generates for learning among students, and that it does this by being different in its time block, its non-grade format and its approach to instruction. Respondants said that it "is a learning experience that children slip into without being aware of it"; that "learning is almost like osmosis, without a struggle"; that students are "real excited" about the class. Students themselves report that they "have a lot of fun"; "they get partners and talk with them [in Spanish or French]."

The other side of the coin is expressed, however, by some respondants who say that "those who are motivated by grades are having trouble doing French," in an ungraded program and one student said that "most students enjoy the program, but there are about 4 out of 20 who don't."

Findings about outcomes. The effects, or outcomes of the program on students were of an academic and an attitudinal nature. Academic effects consisted of the "discipline of listening, concentrating], and pay[ing] attention to a task." The program helps students to see concepts by "exercising their memories and their listening capabilities."

Perhaps the most exciting effects of the program on students are the academic and attitudinal (which precedes which?) changes that occur for students in "special reading groups or who are

Learning Disabled. These students are "doing beautifully in French" as they "gain self-confidence in something that is thought of as very hard." This is such an exciting finding that I want to give several examples of respondants' comments:

> One child was the worst child in everything; now this child is the best in French and good in everything.
>
> A label has been removed from a retarded child since he now sits in 5th grade [language] classroom.
>
> A hearing-problem child doesn't miss a beat.
>
> A slow reader who compensates by listening has a boosted self-image.
>
> In this program the LD child has more advantages than the gifted.
>
> Average and below-average students are excited to find that they can compete with kids that have been showing them up all these years in reading and writing.

These comments support the contention of second language teachers that L2-study is for everyone, not just the gifted, or the elite. Second language teachers cite the way study of another language "can broaden students' perceptions of the world"; "encourage non-elitist ideas"; and "teach multiculturalism." Nevertheless, the public often sees the study of second languages as something that only the brightest or wealthiest students do. Perhaps these findings can help change some of those elitist ideas.

The range of opinion on the other exterme involved only one child whose parents asked that he not be involved in the program, but that he receive extra help in reading and science instead.

Other effects. Generally, other effects of the program are good. Students who are too young for the program can hardly wait to begin it; students who are beyond its reach feel overlooked. Teachers are delighted because they have some extra planning time, even if they stay in the classroom during the language class. Other teachers and principals are taking the classes right along with the students. Parents have been asking for this kind of program for a long time and are delighted it finally exists. Principals are pleased because they see students learning, as shown by the remarks of one principal: "Whatever benefits the youngsters will help me. It makes for a stronger school and makes my job easier, that is, to help children."

Negative effects. There are some negative effects of the program. These have to do with loss of academic learning time. Language classes interrupt the regular classroom schedule, and often teachers do not have time to finish a concept they have started. Students point out that "teachers need more time to get certain subjects done and they don't get it because we have to go" and that teachers "can't give extra help to students" because students must

go to language class. A teacher states, "I've had to cut out X, and I don't like to do that."

Other negative effects result from student behavior upon return from language class. A teacher says, "Sometimes they come back keyed up too much." The same teacher then says that often "children come back happier because of the moving around and dancing" that happens in language class.

A negative effect on principals includes the difficulty of scheduling, especially as the program expands into grades beyond sixth. A principal who "read it in the paper" when the 5th and 6th grade program began, felt equally unconsulted about the 7th grade program. Other well-established and successful programs filled the only elective slot in the 7th grade school day, and language classes were scheduled for the last period of the day (7th), which is an add-on period. That is, school actually ends after the 6th period, but language classes, sports, and clubs are offered during the 7th period. Transportation is not available to students who elect to say for the 7th period. Nevertheless, there are enough students who want to take Spanish and French to offer a class for each language.

SAMPLE PREFERENCE ITEM

The interviews provided a range of opinion about the program, but no statements can be made at this point about the generalizability or the strength of those opinions. In order to

find out if a given opinion expressed in the interview data is one held by many people and that they feel very strongly about that opinion, a Preference Rating survey will be administered in the Spring of the second academic year (1985-86). Items like the following will appear on the survey:

1. Spanish and French classes should be held after school.

1	2	3	4	5
strongly agree	moderately agree	no opinion	moderately disagree	strongly disagree

[Several items intervene]

15. Spanish and French classes should be held after school.

1	2	3	4	5
strongly agree	moderately agree	no opinion	moderately disagree	strongly disagree

The number of respondants will give an indication of how many persons hold this opinion, and the total points scored for a pair of items will indicate how strongly people feel on this continuum of opinion.

RESULTS OF TESTS

At the end of the first instructional year, teacher-made tests were given to all 5th and 6th graders who had studied French and Spanish. The tests were designed to examine students on what had been taught, not a standardized body of knowledge prescribed by an outside agency. Tests were of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Sample test items are available on transparency. The scores were reported by the two teachers in a format that made comparison between languages impossible, even if it had been desirable. The scores were subjected to CHI-square and ANOVA analysis and there were no significant differences between or among the groups of scores for class groups or for skill groups. In French, reading and writing scores were lower than listening and speaking scores, which may reflect the purposeful emphasis by the teacher on the latter skills.

These data serve as baseline data for grades 5 and 6. The same tests will be given in the same way in 1985-86. At that time tests for grades 4 and 7 will also be given. By the end of the second instructional year, then, test scores will be available for comparative two-year data for grades 5 and 6, and baseline data for grades 4 and 7. By the end of 1986-87, three-year comparative data will be available for grades 5 and 6; two-year comparative data will be available for grades 4 and 7; and baseline data for grades 3 and 8 will be available.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These are not the usual recommendations that an evaluator sets forth for compliance with a standard. Instead, these are recommendations suggested by the people who are served by and who are living the REFLES program for ways to improve their own program. Generally, they wanted more: more time for teachers to work together for articulation between grades, and between elementary middle and high schools; more time for students to take Spanish and French; more languages; more collaboration between central office and across lines between schools; more publicity; more materials; more planning time.

NOTES

1. The author thanks the administrators, teachers, parents and students of Radford City Schools, Radford, VA for their cooperation in the completion of this study. This project was funded by the Virginia Department of Education and Radford City Schools. Readers wishing additional information about the RE-FLES program itself should contact Dr. Charles Franklin, Superintendent, or Dr. Yvonne Thayer, Elementary Supervisor, at Radford City Schools, PO Box 3698, Radford, VA 24143.

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